

English Catholic Montreal Symposium on the Family

Three Position Papers from the Perspective of Philosophy

Session I: The Notion of the Family

Session II: The Internal Dynamics of the Family

Session III: The External Relations of the Family

Introduction

Today the leader of the Roman Catholic Church is a philosopher. It is with this fact in mind that I have attempted to summarize what I consider to be some of the main points in Pope John Paul II's philosophy of the family. His views on this subject have been expressed in his weekly Wednesday night audiences in Rome, subsequently published in L'Osservatore Romano (1979-81), in the Encyclical On Human Work¹⁹⁸⁰ and in the Exhortation The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World. In these writings he has developed an innovative and extremely challenging spirituality and philosophy of the Christian family. It is my hope that this Bishop's Symposium on the Family will be able to respond to some of these ideas.

Christine Allen
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Concordia University
Montreal

Session I: The Notion of the Family
Perspective: Philosophy
by Christine Allen

Pope John Paul II defines the family as follows:

" The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons." (Exhortation 18)

This definition opens up several important areas of thought:

- 1) The Christian family, as a community of persons, may include in addition to the intact family of natural parents and children, also families with only adopted children, single -parent families, and families whose parents have died.

Therefore, it is important for the local Church to teach that there are various kinds of Christian families, and that, given life's circumstances, a Christian vocation to family life can take many different forms.

- 2) The Christian family, as defined above, demands a multigenerational dimension. Two adults, who are not interested in children, can not be considered a family.

Therefore, it is important for the Church to teach that a vocation to family life implies a vocation to the future.

- 3) The first task of the family, that is, to develop an authentic community of persons involves the capacity to practice decisions made in freedom, acts of self- giving with its complement receiving of another person, acts of fidelity, and acts of love.

Therefore, it is important for the local Church to develop an effective methodology for learning how to be authentic persons as well as how to teach children to achieve the same goal.

In the history of the Church, the monastic vocation, for example was welcomed by very sophisticated rules and guidelines for achieving such personhood within a monastic family. Today, there is an urgent need for similar kinds of guidelines to be recognized and written down, so that they may become accessible to the entire Church community. It would seem that the best persons to write such guidelines would be women and men, who in their mature years could reflect on what allowed their own marriages to achieve this goal.

In the past, young couples were guided by the example and words of older couples within the extended family complex. With the isolation of the nuclear family young couples are now abandoned to learn by experience how to live in a fruitful marriage. The Church functions primarily ~~in~~ ^{through} sacramental and crises intervention ~~and~~ in relation to these couples. The extraordinary breakdown in marriage testifies to the unfortunate results of this pattern. It is urgent, therefore, for the Church to

assume a new responsibility for the continuous guidance of married couples throughout their marriage. This could best be done by the creation of numerous small couple to couple communities, supplemented by priests and nuns with a specific ministry to the family.

Session II: Internal Dynamics of the Family

Perspective: Philosophy

by Christine Allen

In the last few years Pope John Paul II has begun to develop a new philosophy of the relation of woman and man within marriage. His view can be characterized as a theory of sex complementarity. What is new about his views is the insistence on the double value of differentiation and equality between women and men.

In the history of the Catholic Church the philosophy of the relation of woman and man had, through the theories of Aristotle which were incorporated by St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas, argued for the natural superiority of the man. Woman was described as a defective and imperfect man, and also as a less perfect reflection of the image of God. I characterize this philosophical theory as sex polarity.

John Paul has argued against this traditional view in his sermons on marriage in which he claims woman and man are equally created in the image of God, and that they have an equal worth and dignity in relation to one another. The Holy Father is also attempting to defend the differentiation of the sexes against a contemporary secular world which seems to be pushing towards a view that there are no important differences between the sexes. This secular view, I call the sex unity or unisex theory.

The development of a philosophy of sex complementarity has several important consequences for the internal dynamics of the family. Three such consequences I will mention below:

1) Shared authority of husband and wife in the family.

Within the sex polarity model of the family, the father had absolute authority over his wife and children. Sex complementarity involves an equality of authority combined with a differentiation

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depending upon the specific personalities, ^{biology,} and functions of the woman and man within a specific family.

The Church must meet the challenge of potential conflicts within this model of shared authority. One way would be through couple to couple communities which could act as an informal advisory when a conflictual issue arises within a family. Another would be to provide the family with a 'trusted third person', such as a priest, nun, or lay consultant, to help resolve the conflict.

Shared authority within a family necessarily opens the family up to the community. Although this may occur in a time of need, it would have the benefit of breaking down the isolation of the nuclear family and grounding it in Christian community.

2) Shared responsibility of husband and wife for work and rest:

For many centuries the Church has considered the father to be the sole provider for the family and the mother to be the sole houseworker. John Paul, however, has stated in his Exhortation that women and men may participate equally in these two functions. More specifically, he stated that a woman has the right to work in the public sphere when her gifts seem to imply a capacity in that area. At the same time, he also insists that a woman also has the right to work at home full time, especially to care for young children.

The Church should be at the forefront in helping couples discern their particular gifts. Once again, a couple to couple community might best help discern how a particular husband and wife should live out their family life in relation to work.

In addition, the Church should be innovative in helping to establish connections between those of its members who have a gift for the care of young children and those of its members

who have young children who need supplemental care. In this way it will establish a new level of Christian community to replace the shattered extended family of the past.

Finally, the Church ought to be instrumental in helping all its members live regular periods of rest. In On Human Work John Paul stated: " Man ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God Himself wished to present His own creative activity under the form of work and rest (25). " For the isolated nuclear family with young children rest is an urgent need which is frequently neglected until one or the other parent becomes worn down by exhaustion. Once again, a small couple to couple community would be able to assess on a regular basis the needs of its members, and to suggest ways of relieving the work of overburdened couples , from time to time, so that they may experience the rest they have been called to take.

3) Shared Responsibility of Husband and Wife for the Regulation of Fertility

John Paul' II insists that the best method for developing a real sex complementarity within marriage involves the regulation of birth by the integration of sexuality within the natural periods of fertility of the wife. It would seem that, in addition to theological reasons for preferring such a method of natural planning, that there are also some persuasive philosophical reasons. Most specifically, it leads the couple into an existential awareness of the fundamental differences between woman and man. It allows their love for one another to flourish within this knowledge. At the same time, mechanical methods hide the differences between the two sexes by making one of the other partner infertile at the moment of the sexual act.

It would seem that the Church has a particular responsibility to communicate in a more effective way the following things in connection with this issue:

1) The Church must show why a method of natural planning is really superior to all other methods of the regulation of fertility.

- a) It must show that it offers to the couple the richest possibility for developing mutual love;
- b) ~~that~~ it helps a couple to overcome the boredom which often accompanies long term sexual relationships which use mechanical means of birth control;
- c) ~~that~~ it is something which should be striven for, as a goal of a husband and wife within marriage.

2) If the ideal of natural planning is accepted as superior to other methods, then the Church must teach how it can be effectively practiced.

- a) It must show how a young woman and man can develop adequate self control and mutual respect to be able to use this method in a way that will increase and not decrease their love for one another;
- b) It must show that the contemporary ' Billings method' which uses an a posteriori reading of the signs of the female body in its preparation for ovulation is superior to the old ' rhythm method' which merely imposes a priori periods of abstinence upon a couple.

It would appear that the Church must begin to develop sophisticated couple to couple communities in which experienced women and men who have successfully learned how to use the ' billings method' of family planning can communicate, husband to husband and wife to wife, the skills which are necessary for its effective use. Just as a postulant in a monastery needs to have guidance to learn about the important practices of the religious life, so young married couples must be guided step by step in their specific vocation to the laity. This advice ought not to occur merely at the moment of the celebration of the sacrament of marriage and at crises points in the marriage, but through out their married lives on a regular basis.

Session III: External Relations of the Family

Perspective: Philosophy

by Christine Allen

The Recent Synod of Bishops concluded with the following four general tasks for the family:

1. forming a community of persons;
2. serving life;
3. participating in the development of society;
4. sharing in the life and mission of the Church.

(Exhortation 17)

The last two general tasks directly relate to the external relations of the family.

Participating in the development of society

Since Vatican Two one of the tasks of the laity has been specifically described as "engaging in the temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God" (Exhortation 47). This view brought about a shift in the concept of the laity as holding themselves above the temporal order and as existing primarily as a source for religious vocations.

Pope John Paul II has emphasised this view of the laity as having a specific call to rebuild the earth through the variety of jobs which are available in the world at large. Work in the world, therefore, is not viewed as merely the way to provide for the needs of the family, but also as a continuation of the creative activity of God.

In this way members of the family have a responsibility to discern their specific gifts and to support one another in helping these gifts to be used in productive work.

A second way that members of a family can participate in the development of the society is through political intervention. In his Exhortation John Paul argues persuasively that Christian families must exercise their responsibilities to relation

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to governments in order to " see that the laws and institutions of the State not only do not offend but support and positively defend the rights of the family." (44)

John Paul has also attempted to differentiate the role of the clergy and religious from the laity in respect to this activity of political intervention. He believes that only the laity ought to participate in elected politics, and indeed that this is one of the specific functions of the laity. The clergy and religious, on the other hand, must remain available to all members of the Church and this would be prohibited by being an active member of a single political party.

Sharing in the life and mission of the Church

While this activity can take many forms, I would like to suggest a particular form it might take for the assembled group of consultants on the family at the Bishop's Symposium. Professional availability to the Church community is extremely important for those Christians who have become professional experts within secular fields. With the increased emphasis on engagement in the temporal world by the laity there is a serious danger that all fruits of the labor will be absorbed by the secular world. The present conference is one of the first attempts of sharing the fruit of this labor with the Church itself.

It seems, however, that this ^{good} beginning ought to be expanded. One way to achieve this expansion would be ~~to~~ to ~~be~~ found a permanent Professional Institute for the Study of the Christian Family. In his exhortation Pope John Paul stated: " I am pleased to emphasize the recent establishment in Rome, at the Pontifical Lateran University, of a Higher Institute for the study of the problems of the family. Institutes of this kind have also been set up in some dioceses." (70) Such an Institute could lay the groundwork for concrete ways of meeting the needs of the Christian family within our specific locale. It should have the highest possible degree of professional excellence and the deepest commitment to Christian spirituality. It would be able to continue ^{then} the important work of transforming the world through the complementary efforts of men and women.